

## WHAT FORM: SERVANTHOOD AMONG SEASONAL FARM WORKERS?

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The Grape Boycott has aroused emotions through<sup>out</sup> the nation. Churchmen are being urged to take one side or another and the polarization seems to intensify as the struggle is prolonged. One can almost hear the cry from the pew: "How did we get mixed up in this fight anyhow? Why not just let the unions and the growers bang away at each other until there is a meeting of the minds?" Or more commonly: "Why do we have to take one side or the other? Surely there must be some middle ground, some reconciling role that the churches can play."

I suppose that the California Migrant Ministry (CMM) must accept primary responsibility for the Church's involvement in the grape strike. But we have not been alone. We are the product of a long history of Migrant Ministry (MM) work in California and throughout the nation and our efforts have been shaped by an understanding of Jesus' ministry that we hold in common with many of you. We have tried to understand and live out servanthood in relationship to seasonal farm workers.<sup>1</sup> How can we be genuinely helpful to the people who harvest the crops? That is the question that got us all involved in this organizing struggle in the vineyards.

Some may ask: Who are farm workers that they need so much help? They are people, with all the frailties and problems common to human beings. For the most part our mainline churches have passed them by, so for 48 years the MM throughout the nation has tried to meet some of the needs of farm workers and their families on behalf of the churches. But farm workers have additional problems because they are poor and unorganized. They have little if any voice in the community. Other people make important decisions about their lives: too many of the their employers unilaterally decide on wages and working conditions; the school boards (in most areas dominated by farm employers) decide how their kids will be educated; the county supervisors (usually dominated by farm employers) decide about public welfare policy and health care. These other people who make the decisions are not

especially cruel or corrupt but they do have interests of their own and like the rest of us they take care of their own interests first; then they take care of those folks who are organized and applying pressure and much later they get to the needs of un-organized farm workers. The result of this power imbalance is exploitation and widespread human suffering. The plight of seasonal farm workers is a longstanding blot on the conscience of America.

Seasonal farm workers are poverty stricken. In California where wages are the highest (except for Hawaii where farm workers have a union) the average seasonal farm worker earns \$2,024 per year.<sup>2</sup> California's Welfare Study Commission made the following statement about farm workers: "One occupational group in California is so deeply locked in poverty that it is set off from all others."<sup>3</sup> The Governor's Advisory Commission on Housing summarized the plight of farm workers in California: "Fewer than 20 percent of the California farm worker families covered in our study lived in dwellings which could be considered adequate by present standards of health, safety and comfort. Sixty-three percent of the dwelling units occupied by general field workers were dilapidated or deteriorated. For 33 percent of the dwelling units occupied by general field workers, the only toilet facilities were pit privies. Thirty percent of the dwellings had no bathing facilities, and 25 percent lacked even so basic a necessity as a kitchen sink with running water. These conditions, to be discussed in detail in the body of the report, offer little evidence of improvement in the relative economic and social position of the agricultural worker in California. He remains, as he has since the state's early transition to intensive labor use farming, among the most poorly housed of California's citizens."<sup>4</sup>

It is true that farm workers can make \$2.00 and more per hour during the peak harvest of some crops (like grapes). But the peak harvest for grapes is only 4-6 weeks.<sup>5</sup> During the rest of the year wages hover around \$1.40 per hour and work is sporadic and uncertain.<sup>6</sup> Grape pickers for example, work an average

of 119 days out of a full 250 day work year.<sup>7</sup> As a result of low wages and seasonal employment annual income for farm worker families is consistently below the poverty level. Who of us could raise our families in dignity on incomes under 3,000 per year?<sup>8</sup>

On the job farm workers are denied the simplest protections that other workers in our society take for granted: most farm workers do not have contracts; they do not get overtime pay; too often they do not even know their rate of pay until payday rolls around; they have no paid holidays or vacations; they are not covered by compulsory unemployment insurance; they do not get health or pension benefits; safety provisions are often inadequate, there are no regular rest periods; toilets and sanitary drinking water may or may not be provided.<sup>9</sup> Farm workers regularly go to work not knowing how long the day will be or how many days of work there will be that week. Workers are laid off in the middle of the day, the middle of the week, for days or weeks at a time with no notice and no clear indication of when work will be available. Farm workers can be fired at any time without explanation; and there are no established channels for grievances.

These conditions are general but not universal. Some employers are unusually sensitive to the needs of their workers. But the conditions described above do represent the experience of the vast majority of seasonal farm workers in California and the USA.

If you were trying to develop an adequate servant ministry among seasonal farm workers, how would you go about it? That is the question<sup>that</sup> the MM people have been struggling with for 48 years. For most of those years the answer has taken the form of charitable services designed to meet the special needs of low income people: worship and Christian education in labor camps, remedial education for children who have fallen behind in school, day care centers, visiting nurses and medical clinics, toy sales at Christmas and food for families out of work and un-

able to qualify for welfare assistance. These were (and are) acts of mercy often well done and often needed and appreciated.

In addition to these charitable services the MM worked on legislation to include farm workers under Social Security and on legislation that would expand public services (e.g., health care and day care centers) to more and more migrants. Many MM people throughout the country spent countless hours pressing public agencies to be more responsive to the needs of farm workers. Oftentimes MM staff would have to run a pilot recreation or tutorial program in order to prove to school officials and others that farm workers needed and wanted help.

In the late 1950's and early 1960's the staff and policy makers of the CMM began to ask some uncomfortable questions about the "service approach" to the needs of farm workers; e.g., wouldn't it be better if farm workers could earn enough to buy their own medical care and their own Christmas toys and their own Thanksgiving turkeys? Wouldn't it be better if they were organized and strong enough to influence the way the educational system treats their children, to protect themselves from mistreatment on the job and discrimination in the community? Wouldn't that be better in terms of how many workers would be served and also in terms of dignity and self-respect among both workers and employers? And we began to wonder whether there would ever be unemployment insurance or minimum wage legislation until farm workers were strong enough as a group to demand it?

Having been shook by these questions-many of which came from farm workers and their leaders-we asked ourselves why we were so enthusiastic about charitable services and so reluctant to get down to wages, working conditions and to the power realities that underlie the farm worker's plight. The answer was plain: our own self-interest was tied to the status quo. Our financing and our "successful programs" in labor camps and rural slums depended on the good will of farmers and on

the cooperation of local church people who worked with us and who supported our efforts. To press for social change might mean losing those relationships and that money and those well-known and widely respected non-controversial programs? What would replace those programs that we knew how to run and who would pay our salaries? Getting all of that out on the table was the first step toward change.

Being young and somewhat reckless the CMM staff began to change direction, putting less emphasis on service programs and more emphasis on assisting people in their attempts at self-determination. Starting as far<sup>back</sup> as 1960 the CMM turned staff over to rural fringe communities that were organizing for jobs or to get a water system. In 1963 we put three (3) organizers together in one section of Tulare County (just north of Delano) to begin building a county-wide poor people's organization. We found we couldn't quite handle all of our grand plans but we learned a lot about organization and conflict and the deeply felt needs of farm workers. Standing with farm workers in community conflicts built trust with them and slowly but surely the aspirations of the workers became more important to us than the needs of the institutional Church and more important than the reputation and survival of our own program.

This process of transition was almost 10 years old when the Delano strike began in 1965. By that time many churchmen outside the CMM staff understood and supported self-determination among farm workers-even when those self-determination efforts were highly controversial.

At the same time that the MM in California (and also in other states) was engaged in early community organization efforts, Cesar Chavez was building a statewide organization of farm workers. Cesar had grown up as a migrant farm worker, Delano being one of the many places his family worked. His wife, Helen, grew up in Delano. After World War II, Cesar and Helen settled in San Jose where Cesar became active in a grass roots Mexican-American organization, the Community Service

Organization (CSO). He became a full-time organizer, worked throughout California and the southwest and by 1961 was the national director of CSO. Because of its strong urban base the CSO chose not to make the needs of farm workers its number one organizational priority. Cesar felt deeply that this was where the most pressing needs were. He left his job with CSO and he and his wife and their eight children settled in Delano (at the southern end of California's great Central Valley). He began building an organization of farm workers that would be composed of farm workers, paid for by farm workers and thus controlled by farm workers. It was a slow, difficult process. The Chavez' family lived on their limited savings and on what they could earn by sporadic work in the fields. By September 1965, the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) had approximately 2,000 family members, nearly half of them in the general Delano area. They had a credit union, an office, and a death benefit insurance plan tied to the \$3.50 per month dues.

The Delano Grape Strike began in September 1965 as a result of a dispute over wages in the grape harvest. It soon became a national symbol of the farm workers' desire for equal collective bargaining and for the protections of a contract. Cesar Chavez emerged as the leader of a non-violent movement for self-determination and dignity.

The CMM staff watched the development of NFWA from the start. Cesar and his family regularly came to our staff retreats. We believed deeply in his vision of organizational strength for the poorest workers in the land. When the membership of the NFWA voted to join the Delano Strike, the leaders asked us for support. With some noticeable administrative nervousness we sent staff to help, called on church leaders to visit Delano to see what was happening and began collecting food and money for the strikers. Support for this basic organizational effort has been central to the program of the CMM from that point on. Other MM's around the country have

also become involved and self-determination for the workers has become the primary issue for the Church's ministry among seasonal farm workers.

What is the issue as we see it: the poverty and suffering experienced by seasonal farm workers is real and acute; in the main it is the result of their weakness; as individuals or as crews or as family units farm workers cannot change the conditions under which they live and work. They have a right to change those conditions and have now chosen the only way open to them in a democratic society. They are organizing so that together they can bargain with their employers and with the society. They are trying to help themselves in a way that protects their dignity and opens up a new future for their children.<sup>10</sup> The organizing is focussed in California but the future of all farm workers is tied to Cesar Chavez and the pioneer workers with him in Delano. If the Delano strikers can succeed then energy and hope will be released to workers throughout the nation.

The workers are being opposed at this point by California's most powerful industry and indeed by agricultural labor users and their business associates around the nation. Prior to every strike and boycott organized workers have sought to meet with their employers to discuss fair procedures for a secret ballot election that would determine once and for all whether the workers want to be represented by the union led by Cesar Chavez (now, the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, UFWOC). This offer has been made to all California table grape growers. To date, not one of these employers has agreed to talk with organized workers about elections.

We are all agreed, I think, that a boycott is an ambiguous happening. It is costly to workers and employers. It affects large and small growers. In many ways it is a waste. But what alternative do workers have? Their employers refuse to talk about elections. The law that guarantees union representation elections when workers petition for them (the National Labor Relations Act, NLRA) does not

cover agriculture or its workers. Under such circumstances what would you do? The only alternative the workers have is to apply economic pressure (through strike and boycott) to persuade their employers to do a reasonable and humane thing, namely, to recognize their organized workers and to respect them by bargaining with them as men. If employers intensify their resistance and spurn mediation efforts (as table grape growers have), then the workers must keep applying pressure until bargaining takes place. Short of accepting their powerless condition or resorting to violence, what else can farm workers do? Unpleasant as a boycott may seem it is still a disciplined, non-violent pressure to bring about needed social change.

From the beginning of the strike we have been accused of taking sides in an economic struggle. We accept that position on the side of the workers. Where else should the servant community be when power is too much on one side and injustice and suffering result? We have taken sides because the farm workers need help if they are to be strong enough to bring about equal bargaining with their employers. Their cause is reasonable and just. They have pursued that cause non-violently. Their employers want to maintain the present unbalanced situation. The workers desperately need help from all men of good will.

Many people suggest: instead of taking sides, seek reconciliation! But that is already our hope. Genuine reconciliation cannot take place in this arena if workers are not strong enough as a group to sit down and talk to their employers as equals. Only at that point will honest communication take place and only at that point can a measure of justice with dignity begin to emerge. Growers have to come to the point where they take their workers seriously and are willing to share important decision-making with them. Employers in agriculture are not now at that point. Hopefully, they will be soon. When bargaining does take place it will be a healthy day for workers, employers and all parts of the agricultural



community.

What about the anguish of small farmers? People in the MM identify with that anguish as do many farm workers. However, it must first be pointed out that the vast majority of farm workers in California are hired by a small percentage of very large commercial farms. Forty-nine thousand of California's 81,000 farms employ no outside labor. Seven percent of the farms employ 75% of the labor.<sup>11</sup> Sixty percent of California's farms average less than 50 acres but the total acreage of these smaller farms is 5 percent of California's agricultural land.<sup>12</sup> Most farm workers therefore must relate to the agribusinesses of the state. They are employed by "factories in the fields."

It must also be said that even the hard-pressed small farmer is not in the same economic position as the worker. The farmer can sell his land; he also has credit at the bank; normally, he has an established place in community life and access to the decision-making process. In terms of human needs, the plight of the workers still demands priority attention. Farm workers often are in sympathy with small farmers because these farmers tend also to be laborers. But in their organizing drive the workers are saying to small farmers: "We will not tolerate any longer a situation where your survival in business is purchased by our poverty and the poverty of our children."

For Christians, the issue must increasingly be dealt with in terms of realistic bargaining power for small farmers. How can small farmers get a fair price for their product at the market place? The National Farmers Organization (NFO) is at work organizing farmers, not to oppose the legitimate aspirations of the workers, but for effective bargaining power at the market place. Perhaps it is in this direction that Christian servanthood among farmers can be discovered.

I must now go back to the first question in the article: What does servant-

hood among farm workers require? How can we be genuinely helpful to the people who harvest the crops? In the CMM work with seasonal farm workers our task is to serve them as effectively as we can. It is also our task to confront the Church with the appropriate form of servanthood among farm workers. What is genuinely useful? That is the servant question. It takes priority over all of the questions about institutional stability and survival. We have concluded that Christians should support the organization of farm workers into a union. It is a limited, human conclusion that comes from our experience in the field. It is a conclusion that did not come easy.

The call to Christian servanthood is not a call to ease or ethical purity; it is often a call to do specific deeds that will in fact help real men who are struggling for a measure of freedom. Farm workers need those relevant deeds of support and in the boycott they are asking for your help and mine. 13

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## FOOTNOTES

1. Seasonal farm workers are those farm workers who work seasonally in agriculture. They do not have year-round jobs on farms. They make up the largest portion of the farm labor force in California. Included in their numbers are migrant and local seasonal farm workers.
2. California Dept. of Employment, Disability Insurance Report, #835, parts 5a, 5b, 5c, 5d 1967.
3. Welfare Study Commission Report - The Pattern of Dependent Poverty in California March 1963, p.370.
4. Appendix to the Report on Housing in California - Governor's Advisory Commission on Housing Problems, April 1963, p.656.
5. Calif. Dept. of Employment: Weekly Farm Labor Report, 881A, #1184, August 3, 1968.
6. Los Angeles Times, op.cit. (article by Greenwood)
7. William H. Metzler - Technological Change & Farm Labor Use, Kern County, Calif. 1961 (Giannini Foundation 1964, Berkeley) Part 11, p.27
8. Family income often includes some earnings of wives and children. The best studies made in California put average family income for seasonal farm workers between \$2500-\$3,000 per year.
9. In a study made by California Rural Legal Assistance Program, and reported by the Los Angeles Times July 1, 1968 and the California Farmer May 18, 1968, it was discovered that in one California county over 90% of the farmers were in violation of state health laws. In another county the researchers determined that only 14 of 139 growers surveyed provided toilets for their workers and that only two of the 14 did so in compliance with legal health standards.
10. The term "union" produces negative reactions even among churchmen who are sympathetic to farm workers. But at its heart, a union is just workers getting together to try to solve their problems. Unionization is a basic form of self-help and an important part of the economic progress of this century.
11. Los Angeles Times, Sunday, November 17, 1968 (article by Leonard Greenwood).
12. Howard Gregor, "The Plantation in California" The Professional Geographer, Vol.14, March 1962.
13. Anyone interested in specific suggestion on how to help, can write the California Migrant Ministry, 1411 West Olympic Blvd., Rm.501, Los Angeles, California 90015.